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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DAMASCUS 000516

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PARIS FOR ZEYA, LONDON FOR TSOU

E.O. 12958: DECL: 05/29/2017

TAGS: PGOV PREL SY

SUBJECT: BASHAR GETS HIS SECOND SEVEN-YEAR TERM IN HOLLOW

REFERENDUM

Classified By: A/DCM William Roebuck, for reasons 1.4 b/d

¶1. (C) Summary: Official Syrian poll results announced May 29 indicated that 97.62 percent of the Syrian voters (or almost 11.2 million persons) who cast a ballot had approved a second seven-year term for Syrian President Bashar al-Asad. Significantly stepped-up pressure on people to vote in the referendum likely inflated the turnout above that witnessed in the parliamentary elections, but to nowhere near the officially reported turnout level of 95 percent of voters.) The People's Assembly is expected to hold a session later in the evening on May 29 to accept the referendum results. No official announcement has been made about the President's inauguration, which is expected to occur around the same time that his first term expires on July 16. Opposition leader Riad Seif expected a further crackdown on the internal opposition in the post-referendum period, particularly given the threat posed by the expected formation of an international tribunal in connection with the assassination of former Lebanese PM Rafik al-Hariri. Foreign diplomats resident in Damascus who informally monitored polling noted a number of procedural problems but did not expect that their governments would issue a statement critical of the referendum. End Summary.

¶2. (C) RESULTS: Syria's Minister of Interior announced at a May 29 press conference that 97.62 percent of Syrian voters (or almost 11.2 million persons) who cast a ballot had approved a second seven-year term for Syrian President Bashar al-Asad during the May 27 referendum held in Syria and at overseas embassies and consulates. As for official turnout figures, the Minister reported that more than 95.86 percent of all eligible Syrian voters inside and out of Syria (or almost 11.5 million persons) cast their ballots. (Comment: Anecdotal reporting indicates significantly lower turnout than that official estimate. Emboffs and FSN's who observed voting at a limited number of polling stations reported voting activity at levels that did not appear perceptibly higher than those witnessed during the recent parliamentary elections. Unofficial estimates of turnout in the parliamentary elections ranged from less than 10 percent to about 30 percent of eligible voters. Significantly stepped-up pressure on people to vote in the referendum likely inflated the turnout above that witnessed in the parliamentary elections, but to nowhere near the officially reported turnout level.)

¶3. (C) According to the Minister of Interior, some 19,500 people voted against Asad. (Comment: Given the police-state nature of the regime, and the lack of any safeguards for

secret ballots, we question whether even a fraction of such

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brave -- but foolhardy -- souls would dare thumb their noses at the regime with such a gesture.) The number of voided ballots (more than 253,000) greatly outnumbered the number of persons who voted "no" on the referendum, according to figures provided by the Minister.

**14. (SBU) WHAT'S NEXT:** The People's Assembly is expected to hold a session later in the evening on May 29 to accept the referendum results. A festival in Damascus celebrating the President's victory has been announced for June 1 along a several mile stretch of a main Damascus thoroughfare. No official announcement has been made about the President's inauguration, which is expected to occur around the same time that his first term expires on July 16. When asked at the press conference about a rumored Cabinet change, the Minister of Interior responded that that decision remained the prerogative of the president but that Cabinet changes often follow presidential referendums. When asked about the possibility of a presidential amnesty, the Minister merely responded that that issue was for the President to decide. Opposition leader Riad Seif, however, downplayed the possibility of an amnesty in a May 29 conversation with A/DCM, saying he believes Asad will crack down harder on the domestic opposition in the coming period, particularly given the threat posed by the expected formation of an international tribunal in connection with the assassination of former Lebanese PM Rafik al-Hariri.

**15. (C) ASSESSING THE REFERENDUM:** At the same time that the Minister was announcing the referendum results, Poloff was hosting a post-referendum coffee with diplomats to exchange insights gathered during unofficial monitoring of the referendum. A number of diplomats had visited polling places

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in Damascus, while Canada and the U.S. visited urban centers outside the capital. Observations included the following:

-- Most polling places did not provide a private place for marking the ballot. In line with some of the more outrageously flattering banners praising Asad's wisdom and leadership, some polling places provided -- we're not kidding -- needles and antiseptic for those Syrians seeking to mark their ballot in blood.

-- Syrians, seeking to vote, could present any form of identification (including one person was witnessed using a business card).

-- Polling officials sometimes cross-checked voter names on a register of district residents, but Syrians seeking to vote in districts outside their own were permitted to do so.

-- Voters' names were sometimes, but not always, registered by hand in a log, along with their identification number. Polling officials in the central Syrian cities of Hama and Homs told one foreign diplomat that this information would be entered into a computer and cross checked to ensure that a voter was not allowed to vote in more than one location. If a voter were to be found to have voted more than once, his ballots would be annulled, according to the polling official who did not explain how the voter's choice would be known to officials. (Comment: It is our assessment that this "safeguard" was not implemented in a way that would discourage multiple voting; in fact multiple voting was almost certainly encouraged, as it inflated turnout, a key preoccupation for the regime.)

-- Voter cards were not stamped at most polling places.

-- There were numerous anecdotal and first-person reports of Syrians (including one child) casting ballots for other voters, merely presenting a form of that person's identification. One Embassy FSN witnessed a man casting ballots for six other persons.

-- There was one report of a police officer examining a voter's ballot before it was cast.

-- Campaign material was present in all of the polling

stations visited, with polling officials sometimes in charge of supervising balloting and overseeing pro-Bashar music.

-- One diplomat also noted that several business contacts critical of the regime had voted for the President, for fear that security officials might somehow find out that they had failed to vote or had voted "no," ruining their prospects of future business contracts.

¶6. (SBU) None of the diplomats from countries including France, Germany, the UK, Sweden, and Canada expected their governments to issue statements critical of the referendum.

¶7. (C) COMMENT: It is still a bit early to get a credible range of soundings on the actual turnout. The regime obviously went to a great deal of expense and effort to communicate to voters the importance it attached to seeing Bashar extended for another seven years in office. But while the Minister of Interior took an extra day to announce official results, perhaps as regime officials debated about how much they wanted to inflate the actual turnout figures, we assess that the regime did not fully succeed in its "get out the vote" campaign. Despite all the forced-grin hoopla and the multitude of "Bashar, We Love You" banners hanging from every conceivable pole and filling every billboard space, and the rumor campaign, aimed at frightening people to go vote or face consequences, there seemed to be very little excitement on voting day. There was also lots of quiet resentment at the vapid slogans -- drained of any political content or plan for the future -- and the incredible waste of money that has gone into the two-week exercise. We will get a better sense in the coming days whether there is any lingering (private) regime disappointment at the real turnout or whether, as is more likely, the cynicism of the entire enterprise allows the regime simply to move on and be content that Asad is safely ensconced in power for another seven years.

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